

—"Don't ask me

What you know is true

Don't have to tell you

I love your precious heart."

INXS - Never Tear Us Apart

Under the Lights

Hong

I woke before the sun. Not by choice—never by choice on a day like this. My body simply refused to continue the pretense of rest, pulling me from uneasy dreams into a consciousness that felt somehow worse. The darkness of my room was absolute, the kind of darkness that existed only in those strange hours between night and morning, when the world seemed to hold its breath and wait for something to happen.

For a long moment, I didn't move.

The ceiling above me was invisible in the blackness, but I stared at it anyway, my eyes open and seeing nothing. My heart was already racing—had been racing, I realized, even in sleep. The particular rhythm of anxiety, familiar and unwelcome, drumming against my ribs like it was trying to escape.

Today was the day.

The thought arrived the way it had every morning for the past week—sudden, heavy, impossible to escape. Today was the day my paintings would hang in the university gallery. Today was the day strangers would stand in front of my work and read the artist statements I'd written, the careful words that tried to explain what I'd been feeling when I put brush to canvas.

Today was the day everyone would see who I really was.

I turned over, pressing my face into the pillow, and tried to go back to sleep. The darkness behind my eyelids was no comfort—images kept surfacing, unbidden and unwanted. The paintings as I'd last seen them, carefully wrapped and transported to the gallery yesterday. The faces of my classmates, their work so much more polished and professional than mine. The particular painting I couldn't stop thinking about—"The Real Me"—and the description I'd written for it.

What we see when we finally stop pretending. The terror and the freedom of being exactly who we are. For everyone who has looked in a mirror and wondered if what they saw was worthy of love.

I'd written those words in a moment of courage, of clarity. Now they felt like a confession I'd made under duress, a secret I'd spilled without understanding the consequences. In a few hours, strangers would read them. Strangers would look at the distorted reflection I'd painted—my own face, rendered in the particular honesty of 3 AM vulnerability—and they would understand something about me that I had spent years trying to hide.

What if they were disgusted?

What if they were indifferent?

What if—and this was somehow the most terrifying option—what if they understood exactly what I'd been trying to say?

The clock on my nightstand read 6:47 AM.

More than four hours until I needed to be at the university. More than four hours of this—this waiting, this spiral, this particular torture that my brain had decided to inflict on itself. I could feel the anxiety coiling tighter in my chest with every passing minute, a physical weight that made it hard to breathe.

I tried to remember what my mom had said about managing anxiety. Something about breathing. Something about grounding techniques. Something about noticing five things I could see, four things I could hear, three things I could touch—I couldn't see anything. The room was too dark.

I couldn't hear anything except my own heartbeat, too fast, too loud.

And the only thing I could touch was the pillow I was pressing my face into, trying to suffocate the panic before it could consume me entirely.

This was ridiculous.

I'd known for weeks that this day was coming. I'd had months to prepare—months to work on the paintings, to write the statements, to get comfortable with the idea of showing my work to the public. I'd watched my classmates go through the same process with something approaching calm, discussing their pieces with professors and peers, making small adjustments based on feedback, treating the whole thing like a normal academic exercise.

Which it was. Which it should be. This was just a student exhibition, not a solo show at a major gallery. The audience would mostly be other students, faculty members, friends and family of the exhibiting artists. The stakes were low. The pressure was manufactured—self-imposed, a product of my own anxious brain rather than any external reality.

None of that knowledge helped.

The paintings on those walls weren't just academic exercises to me. They were pieces of my soul, fragments of my inner life that I'd somehow translated into color and form and hung up for everyone to examine. "Almost"—the two figures reaching toward each other across a threshold of shadow and light—was about Nut. About the months I'd spent keeping him at arm's length, terrified of letting him close, terrified of what would happen if I did. "Fortress"—the figure surrounded by soft things, ambiguous in their protection—was about the walls I'd built to survive, the ways I'd learned to keep myself safe that might also be keeping me trapped.

And "The Real Me"—I couldn't think about "The Real Me" right now. Not without my chest tightening further, not without the panic climbing higher in my throat.

The clock read 6:52 AM now.

Five minutes had passed while I lay here catastrophizing. Five minutes closer to the moment when I would have to get up, get dressed, become the kind of person who could stand in a gallery and accept judgment with grace. Five minutes closer to the exposure I'd been dreading for weeks.

I threw back the covers.

If I couldn't sleep, I might as well be doing something. Anything was better than lying here in the dark, letting my thoughts consume me. Movement might help. Activity might distract. Or at the very least, standing up would make me feel marginally less like a helpless victim of my own anxiety.

The floor was cold under my bare feet—I'd forgotten to put on socks before bed, and now the hardwood was punishing me for the oversight. I shuffled to the window and pulled back the curtain, revealing the first gray hints of dawn. The sky was lightening slowly, the darkness giving way to something that wasn't quite color yet, just the absence of absolute black.

The world continued to exist, I noted. Despite my panic, despite the day ahead, the sun was still preparing to rise. The city beyond my window was still waking up, full of people who had no idea that today was the most terrifying day of my life. For them, it was just Friday. Just another day in a long sequence of days, unremarkable and ordinary.

For me, it was everything.

I stood at the window for a long time, watching the light change. Watching the gray become blue become the first pale gold of sunrise. My reflection was faintly visible in the glass—a ghost of myself, hollow-eyed and anxious, the dark circles under my eyes evidence of too many restless nights.

The person in the reflection didn't look like an artist. Didn't look like someone who was about to debut three paintings in a university exhibition. They looked like

someone who hadn't slept in days, who was running on anxiety and caffeine and the stubborn refusal to admit defeat.

Maybe that was its own kind of strength. Maybe showing up terrified was braver than showing up confident. Maybe the whole point of "The Real Me" was exactly this—the willingness to be seen even when you felt like hiding, the courage to stand in front of strangers even when everything in you was screaming to run. Or maybe I was just rationalizing my own dysfunction. Hard to tell, at 6 AM, with the sun barely risen and my heart still racing.

Eventually, I moved away from the window.

The day wasn't going to wait for me to feel ready. It was going to happen whether I participated or not, whether I panicked or managed to find something like calm. The only question was how I was going to meet it—cowering in my room until the last possible moment, or actually preparing myself for what was ahead.

I chose preparation.

Not because I felt ready—I didn't, I couldn't imagine ever feeling ready for something like this—but because the alternative was worse. The alternative was more of this spiral, more of this paralysis, more hours of staring at the ceiling and imagining every possible way today could go wrong.

At least if I was moving, I was doing something.

The shower helped. Not as much as I'd hoped—the anxiety was still there, coiled in my chest like a snake waiting to strike—but the hot water loosened something in my muscles, washed away the physical residue of a night spent tossing and turning. I stood under the spray longer than necessary, letting the heat soak into my skin, watching the steam cloud the bathroom mirror until my reflection disappeared entirely.

There was something comforting about that—being invisible, even temporarily. Soon I would have to be visible. Soon I would have to stand in front of my paintings while strangers examined them, while people I'd never met read words I'd written about my innermost fears and feelings. But for now, for these few minutes, I could hide behind the steam and pretend the world outside didn't exist.

I washed my hair twice. Scrubbed my body more than necessary. Ran through the routine of cleaning with an attention to detail that was probably obsessive but felt necessary—like if I could just get clean enough, organized enough, prepared enough, then maybe I could face what was coming. It didn't work that way. I knew it didn't work that way. But the ritual was soothing anyway.

Eventually, the hot water ran out.

I stepped out of the shower into air that felt shockingly cold by comparison, wrapping a towel around my waist and wiping the steam from the mirror with my hand. My reflection emerged gradually—first just a blur of color, then features slowly coming into focus.

I looked terrible.

The dark circles under my eyes were worse than I'd realized, deep purple shadows that made me look like I hadn't slept in weeks rather than just the past few nights. My skin had that particular pallor that came from stress and insufficient rest, a gray undertone that made me look vaguely ill. Even my hair, usually cooperative, was hanging in limp strands that suggested my body had given up on maintaining any kind of aesthetic standards.

This was the person who was going to stand in a gallery today. This was the face that would be associated with the paintings, the artist behind the art. What would people think when they looked at me and then at my work? Would they see the connection? Would they understand why the figure in "The Real Me" looked so uncertain, so afraid?

I forced myself to look away from the mirror.

Getting ready properly would help, I told myself. Makeup could hide the dark circles. Good clothes could project confidence I didn't feel. The transformation from exhausted insomniac to presentable artist was possible—I'd done it before, for critiques and presentations and all the other moments when appearance mattered more than reality.

But that was a problem for later. Right now, I was too tired to put on anything more than comfortable clothes—sweatpants and a t-shirt, the kind of outfit I wore on days when I didn't want to make decisions. The real preparations would come later, after breakfast, after I'd had time to settle into the day.

The house smelled like food when I descended the stairs. Something warm and savory, the particular scent of breakfast being prepared. My sister was in the kitchen, I knew, managing the morning chaos with the efficiency of someone who had been doing this for years. Kevin would be there too, probably making some kind of mess, probably chattering about something he'd seen in a cartoon, filling the space with the particular energy of a four-year-old who didn't understand concepts like "quiet" or "still."

For a moment, I hesitated at the bottom of the stairs. Part of me wanted to retreat to my room, to avoid the necessity of human interaction until I absolutely had to engage with the world. My sister would notice something was wrong—she always did—and I wasn't sure I had the energy for the conversation that would follow. The reassurances she would offer, the encouragement I would have to accept gracefully,

the performance of being okay that family interactions required. But hiding wasn't really an option. She'd come looking for me eventually, concerned about my absence, worried in that particular way that older sisters worried. Better to face it now, while I still had the energy to pretend.

The kitchen was bright with morning light. My sister was at the stove, doing something with eggs that smelled incredible. Kevin was at the table, his attention fixed on the small TV in the corner where some cartoon was playing—bright colors, loud sounds, the particular chaos of children's programming. He had his breakfast in front of him—cereal, already half-eaten—but he wasn't really paying attention to it, too absorbed in whatever story was unfolding on the screen.

"Morning," my sister said without turning around. She had that ability—the motherly sixth sense that told her when someone had entered a room without needing to see them. "I thought I heard the shower. How are you feeling?"

I crossed to the counter, considering how to answer. The honest response—terrified, exhausted, seriously considering faking my own death to avoid the exhibition—seemed excessive. But outright lying felt wrong too, especially when she was clearly asking because she cared.

"I'm anxious," I admitted finally, reaching for the bread and the chocolate spread. "The exhibition opens in a few hours."

"I know." Her voice was warm with sympathy. "I've had the date marked on my calendar for weeks."

She turned away from the stove, and I saw her expression properly for the first time—the concern underneath the warm smile, the particular attention she was paying to my face. Taking inventory of my dark circles, probably. Noting the tension in my shoulders, the way I was gripping the bread knife a little too tightly.

"You don't look so good today," she said, confirming my suspicions. "Did you sleep at all?"

"Some." Another partial truth. "Not enough."

"Hong." She set down the spatula she'd been holding and crossed the kitchen to stand beside me. "The paintings are beautiful. I saw them when you were working on them here, before they went to the gallery. They're going to be amazing."

"You're biased."

"I'm honest. There's a difference." She reached up and smoothed my hair back from my forehead, the gesture so maternal it made my chest ache. "I know you're scared. I know this feels like the most terrifying thing you've ever done. But you've already done the hard part—you made the art. Now you just have to let other

people see it."

"That's the scary part."

"I know." She smiled, soft and understanding. "But you're not doing it alone. Your friends are going to be there. I'm going to be there. Kevin's going to be there—"

"Kevin's going to be bored and ask when we can go home."

"Kevin's going to make his impressed face, and we'll pretend we don't notice that it looks like he needs to sneeze." She laughed, the sound bright in the morning kitchen. "The point is, you're not alone. You've got people who love you, who are going to stand beside you and be proud of you, no matter how it goes."

I wanted to believe her. Wanted to absorb the reassurance, to let it ease the knot of anxiety in my chest. But the fear was stronger than logic, louder than love. It whispered that she was just saying what sisters were supposed to say. That the paintings weren't as good as I'd hoped, as good as I'd convinced myself during the long nights of working on them. That today would be a disaster, a humiliation, proof of all the inadequacies I'd been trying to hide.

But I didn't say any of that. "Thanks." I said instead, because that was what the moment required.

My sister studied my face for another moment, clearly not fooled by the simple word but choosing not to push. Then she returned to the stove, to the eggs that were probably in danger of overcooking, and the conversation shifted to the practical.

"I have meetings until noon," she said, sliding eggs onto a plate with practiced efficiency. "But I've told my boss I'm leaving early. I'll pick up Kevin from kindergarten and we'll be at the gallery by one, one-thirty at the latest."

"You don't have to—"

"I want to." Her voice was firm. "This is important. My brother's first exhibition—I'm not missing that."

I spread chocolate on my toast and reached for the strawberries, the familiar motions of breakfast grounding me slightly. The strawberries were bright red and perfectly ripe, and looking at them made me think of Kevin—the way he always seemed to have snacks, the care he put into everything related to food and comfort, the particular attention he paid to the small things that made life a little brighter.

Kevin was coming today. He'd promised, even though he had his own performance to prepare for—the dance showcase that was happening tomorrow and Sunday, the choreography that had been consuming his life for weeks. His body was exhausted, I knew. The compression knee brace he wore to rehearsals, the bruises that

appeared and faded and appeared again. He was pushing himself hard, too hard probably, and yet he was still planning to be at my exhibition.

Everyone was coming. That was what I kept telling myself, the mantra I repeated whenever the panic threatened to overwhelm me. Tui and Est and Nut and Lego—they would all be there, filling the space with familiar faces, giving me something to focus on that wasn't the terror of being judged by strangers.

I ate my breakfast slowly, watching Kevin's cartoon without really seeing it. The characters were bright and cheerful, their conflicts easily resolved within the span of a single episode. I envied them their simplicity—the way their world worked, the way problems could be solved with friendship and determination and a catchy song at the right moment.

The real world was messier. Harder. Full of exhibition openings that felt like public executions and anxieties that couldn't be resolved with anything as simple as a musical number.

Eventually, my sister had to leave.

"I'm dropping Kevin at kindergarten," she said, gathering her things, shepherding my nephew toward the door with the efficient multitasking of parenthood. "Then meetings until noon. But I'll be there this afternoon, I promise."

She stopped at the door, turning to look at me one more time. I'd risen from the table, was standing with my empty plate in my hand, still in my comfortable clothes, still looking like someone who'd crawled out of bed after a week without sleep.

"Hong." She crossed back to me, her heels clicking on the kitchen floor. She took my face in her hands, the gesture so unexpected that I froze. "Listen to me."

"I'm listening."

"You are talented. Genuinely, extraordinarily talented. Your paintings are beautiful, and they say something true, and the people who see them today are going to understand that." Her eyes were fierce, bright with something that looked almost like tears. "I know you don't believe it right now. I know your brain is telling you all the ways this could go wrong. But I believe it. I believe in you. And I need you to trust that, even if you can't trust yourself."

"I—"

"Mom and Dad would be proud." Her voice cracked slightly on the words. "If they were here. They'd be so proud of you."

The mention of our parents—safely distant in China, visiting grandparents, unable to fly back for three days of an exhibition—sent a complicated wave of emotions through me. Relief, because I wasn't sure I could handle their presence on top of



everything else. Guilt, because I should have wanted them there. Sadness, because their absence was just another reminder that I'd learned long ago not to expect their presence for the things that mattered.

They'd offered to come back, when I'd first told them about the exhibition. A polite offer, the kind that came with enough qualifications that I knew it wasn't entirely genuine. The flight costs, the timing, the disruption to their trip—all reasons that made perfect sense, that I couldn't really argue with, that still left me standing in the kitchen on the morning of my exhibition with only my sister to send me off.

"I know," I said, even though I didn't. "Thanks."

She kissed my cheek, a quick press of lips that smelled like the coffee she'd been drinking. Then she ran a hand through my hair, the same maternal gesture as before, and stepped back. "Don't stress so much," she said softly. "See you this afternoon. Cheer up." And then she was gone, Gavin in tow, leaving me alone in the sudden quiet of the house.

The silence was oppressive. I stood in the kitchen for a long moment, listening to the absence of sound. The house felt different without my sister and Gavin in it—larger somehow, emptier, full of spaces that were usually filled with motion and noise and the particular chaos of family life.

The dishes went into the dishwasher with mechanical motions, my hands doing the work while my brain continued its anxious spiral. The coffee pot was still half-full, and I poured myself a cup even though I'd already had caffeine and probably didn't need more. The familiar ritual of adding cream and sugar, stirring until the liquid turned the right shade of tan.

I drank it standing at the counter, looking out the window at the backyard. The garden my mother had planted years ago was still there, slightly overgrown now that she wasn't around to maintain it, but still alive. Still producing flowers and vegetables and the particular evidence that someone had once cared about this space.

The clock on the wall read 8:47 AM.

Just over an hour until I needed to leave for the university. Just over an hour to transform myself from this—this rumpled, exhausted, terrified person in sweatpants—into someone who could stand in front of their art and accept whatever judgment came.

The suit was waiting upstairs.

I thought about it with something like dread—my father's suit, borrowed from his closet, the kind of thing he wore to conferences and important meetings where people needed to take him seriously. He'd offered it before leaving for China, his

voice carrying that particular tone of parental obligation that wasn't quite the same as genuine interest.

"You'll need to look presentable," he'd said. "Can't show up to a gallery in those things you usually wear."

Those things I usually wear. Like my clothing choices were a problem to be solved rather than an expression of who I was.

I'd accepted the suit because it was easier than arguing. Because part of me still wanted to please him, even after all these years. Because maybe, I'd thought, wearing something of his would make me feel more confident, more capable, more like the kind of person who could stand in a gallery and accept praise. But sitting here now, imagining myself in that suit, all I could see was a costume. A disguise. Someone playing dress-up as an artist instead of actually being one.

I set down my coffee cup and moved to the living room, sinking onto the floor with my back against the couch. The carpet was soft under my legs, familiar and grounding. This was where I'd sat during countless movie nights with my sister and Kavin. Where I'd stretched out to work on sketches when my desk felt too confining. Where I'd had conversations that mattered, decisions that shaped the course of my life. Maybe I could just stay here. Skip the exhibition entirely. Send a message to the coordinator claiming illness, hide in my room until the whole thing was over, pretend it had never happened. The thought was tempting in its simplicity. No exhibition meant no judgment. No strangers examining my work meant no possibility of rejection. No vulnerability meant no pain.

But it also meant no possibility of connection. No chance for someone to look at my paintings and feel understood. No opportunity to discover that maybe, just maybe, the things I'd been afraid to say were things that other people needed to hear.

My phone buzzed, interrupting the spiral.

I reached for it automatically, expecting a message from the group chat—Tui or Est or Lego sending encouragement, the kind of supportive texts that had been appearing regularly all week. But the notification wasn't from the group chat.

Lego: I'm outside.

I stared at the message for a moment, processing. He was here. At my house. Before the exhibition, before I'd even gotten dressed, before I'd done any of the preparations that were supposed to transform me into someone presentable.

I scrambled to my feet, moving toward the sliding glass door that led to the patio. My mother had always hated when I used this entrance—"Like an animal," she'd say, her voice carrying that particular edge of frustrated affection—but it was habit now, ingrained through years of childhood departures and arrivals.

The glass slid open, and suddenly I was outside, the morning air cool against my face.

Lego was standing on the patio. He looked—stunning. That was the only word for it. He was dressed semi-formally, as the university required—a short-sleeved white shirt, a black button-down vest, black trousers, shoes with a slight heel that made him look taller than usual. His makeup was flawless: lipstick and gloss, eyeliner that made his eyes look larger and more luminous, foundation that smoothed over the tiny freckles I usually saw scattered across his cheeks.

His hair was pulled back in a careful bun, decorated with pale ribbons that caught the morning light. Silver hairpins tamed the shorter strands, adding sparkle wherever they appeared. He looked like he was ready for a photoshoot, not a casual morning visit.

When he saw me, his face broke into a smile—that bright, particular expression that always made something in my chest feel lighter. "P'Hong," he said, waving a small, shy gesture that seemed completely at odds with how put-together he looked. "I hope it's okay that I came early. I wanted to—"

I didn't let him finish.

I crossed the distance between us in three quick steps and pulled him into my arms. The hug was probably too tight, too desperate, too much of an admission of how badly I needed the contact. But Lego didn't seem to mind. He made a soft sound of surprise, then relaxed into the embrace, his arms coming up to wrap around my waist.

"P'Hong?" His voice was muffled against my shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"I'm nervous, shorty." The words came out before I could stop them. "I'm so nervous I feel like I might throw up."

He pulled back slightly, looking up at me with those eyes that always seemed to see more than they should. The concern in his expression was gentle, understanding—not the kind that made you feel pitied, but the kind that made you feel seen.

"That's why I came early," he said. "I figured you might be freaking out."

"I'm not freaking out."

"P'Hong. You're in sweatpants, you look like you haven't slept in a week, and you just hugged me like I was the last lifeboat on a sinking ship." His smile was soft, teasing but kind. "You're definitely freaking out."

I couldn't argue with the assessment. "Okay. Maybe a little."

"That's okay. That's what I'm here for." He took my hand and started pulling me

toward the door. "Come on. Let's go inside and figure this out."

We settled on the floor of the living room, Lego cross-legged on the carpet with his bag beside him, me sitting with my back against the couch like I'd been doing before he arrived. The morning light was brighter now, streaming through the windows and making everything look more real, more present, more inescapable.

"Talk to me," Lego said. "What specifically is scaring you?"

I considered the question, trying to translate the amorphous cloud of anxiety into something I could actually articulate.

"Everything?" I tried.

"That's not specific."

"The paintings. The descriptions. The way people are going to look at my work and —" I stopped, struggling to find the words. "They're going to see things I've never said out loud to anyone. They're going to read what I wrote and understand things about me that I've spent years trying to hide."

Lego nodded slowly, processing this. "The painting about the mirror. 'The Real Me.'"

"That one especially." I looked down at my hands, unable to meet his eyes. "I painted it at three in the morning, after one of those nights when I couldn't stop thinking about—about what's wrong with me. Why I can't just be normal. And I wrote this statement for it, this thing about wondering if what you see in the mirror is worthy of love, and now strangers are going to read that and—"

"And what?"

"And know." The word came out smaller than I intended. "They're going to know that I feel that way. They're going to look at me, standing in the gallery, and they're going to see the person who painted that, who wrote those words, and they're going to—I don't know. Pity me. Judge me. Think I'm—"

"What if they recognize themselves?"

I looked up. Lego was watching me with an expression I couldn't quite read—something soft and serious, deeper than his usual brightness.

"What?"

"What if someone stands in front of that painting," he said slowly, "and reads your statement, and feels—seen? What if they've been asking themselves the same questions, having the same doubts, and your art is the first thing that's ever made them feel like they're not alone?"

I hadn't considered that. Hadn't been able to think past my own fear long enough to

imagine that the vulnerability might serve a purpose beyond exposing me.

"That's—" I started.

"That's why we make art." Lego's voice was gentle but certain. "Not to be perfect. Not to show everyone how together we have it. We make art because we have things inside us that need to come out, and sometimes those things connect with other people. Sometimes our pain makes someone else's pain a little more bearable."

He reached over and took my hand, his fingers small and warm around mine.

"Your paintings are brave, P'Hong. They're honest in a way that most art isn't. And yeah, that's scary. But it's also—" He paused, searching for the right word. "It's also necessary. The world needs more people willing to be that honest."

I didn't know what to say. The lump in my throat was too big, the emotion too overwhelming. So I just squeezed his hand, trying to communicate through touch what I couldn't manage with words. We sat like that for a moment, in the quiet of the living room, the morning light growing brighter around us. Then Lego's expression shifted, becoming more practical.

"Okay," he said. "Enough feelings for now. We need to get you ready. What are you wearing?"

The question brought me back to earth with a thud.

"My father left me a suit," I said. "It's upstairs. He thought I should look—presentable."

Something flickered in Lego's expression. "Show me."

We climbed the stairs to my room—which was, thankfully, presentable enough. I'd cleaned yesterday in a fit of anxious energy, channeling my panic into organization rather than destruction. The suit was hanging on the back of my desk chair, carefully pressed, waiting to transform me into someone I wasn't.

I showed it to Lego.

The jacket was too broad in the shoulders—designed for my father's frame, not mine. The pants were slightly too long, requiring hems I hadn't had time to get. The shoes, lined up beneath the chair, looked like something a businessman would wear to intimidate people in meetings.

"I tried it on yesterday," I admitted. "I looked—"

"Like a costume." Lego finished.

"Exactly." The relief of being understood was almost overwhelming. "Like a kid

playing dress-up. Like someone pretending to be an adult."

Lego circled the suit slowly, examining it from different angles. His expression was thoughtful, evaluating.

"The jacket's nice," he said finally. "Good quality. Classic cut. But the whole thing together—" He shook his head. "It's not you. And you should look like yourself today. These are your paintings."

"Then what do I wear?"

Lego grinned, and I recognized the particular light in his eyes—the expression he got when he had an idea, when he was about to take charge of a situation.

"We're going to go through your closet," he said. "Everything in it. And we're going to find something that's semi-formal enough to satisfy the dress code, but still feels like you."

"I don't know if I have anything like that."

"You'd be surprised." He was already moving toward my closet, throwing open the doors with enthusiasm. "Trust me, P'Hong. I've been doing this—" he gestured at his own carefully curated outfit— "for years. I know how to make clothes work for you instead of against you."

What followed was the most thorough examination of my wardrobe I'd ever experienced. Lego went through everything—shirts and pants and jackets, things I'd forgotten I owned, pieces I'd bought years ago and never worn. He laid options on my bed in various combinations, stepping back to evaluate, shaking his head, trying again.

I sat on the edge of the bed, watching him work, feeling strangely detached from the whole process. It was like having a very efficient fairy godmother, one who muttered things like "the proportions are wrong" and "this color washes you out" while constructing an outfit from the wreckage of my fashion sense.

"This," he said finally, holding up a black t-shirt with a slightly interesting neckline. "Simple but elegant. Under—" he grabbed my father's jacket from the desk chair—"just the jacket. No matching pants. Your own black dress pants—the ones that actually fit you—with your belt and your usual accessories."

I looked at the combination he was suggesting. The black t-shirt, soft and comfortable. My own pants, tailored to my body. The jacket as an accent rather than a uniform.

"And the shoes?"

Lego looked at the dress shoes my father had left, then at the boots I usually wore.

His expression was clear.

"The boots," he said. "Definitely the boots."

I tried it on.

The transformation was subtle but significant. I still looked like myself—the same person who wore black and silver, who preferred comfortable over formal, who had spent years developing an aesthetic that felt authentic rather than performative. But I also looked—put together. Professional. Like someone who was about to show their art in a gallery.

"Better," Lego declared, surveying his work. "Much better. You look like an artist, not like someone's uncomfortable nephew at a wedding."

"Thanks. I think."

"It was a compliment." He tilted his head, studying me. "One more thing, though."

"What?"

"You could try makeup too." His voice was casual, like he was suggesting something as simple as a different tie. "Only if you want to. But it might help with—" He gestured at his own face, clearly referring to the dark circles I knew were visible, the pallor of too many sleepless nights.

I looked at myself in the mirror. Looked at Lego, with his flawless skin and subtly enhanced features. Looked at the stark contrast between how put-together he appeared and how exhausted I still looked.

"The makeup," I said slowly. "It doesn't sound so bad."

Lego's face lit up with the particular joy of someone who had been given permission to share something they loved.

"You'll look amazing," he promised. "I'm not going to do anything dramatic—just some basics to even out your skin, hide the dark circles, make you look more awake. The goal is for you to look like yourself, just—" He searched for the word.

"Enhanced?"

"Exactly. The best version of yourself."

He pulled a makeup case from his bag—he'd brought it, I realized, must have anticipated that I might need help with more than just clothes—and set it on my desk. Then he gestured for me to sit.

"In the desk chair," he instructed. "And face me. The light is better from this angle."

I sat, suddenly nervous in a different way. Makeup wasn't something I'd ever really done—not beyond the occasional stage production in high school, where someone else had applied everything and I'd just sat still and tried not to mess it up. This felt more intimate, more personal.

Lego knelt in front of me, his face close to mine, his concentration absolute. He studied my skin with professional attention, then began pulling products from his case—tubes and bottles and brushes, a whole arsenal of cosmetic technology I didn't understand.

"Close your eyes." he said softly.

I did, and felt the cool touch of something against my under-eye area—concealer, probably, the stuff that would hide the evidence of my sleepless nights. Lego's fingers were gentle, dabbing and blending with practiced efficiency.

"How did you learn all this?" I asked, my eyes still closed.

"Practice." I could hear the smile in his voice. "Years of practice. I started when I was—maybe fourteen? I wanted to look more like myself, if that makes sense. More like the person I felt like inside instead of what my face naturally showed."

"And now?"

"Now it's second nature. Like speaking a language—at first you have to think about every word, every grammatical construction. But eventually it just flows."

The brush moved across my face, feather-light touches that felt like being painted. Like being transformed into something new, or maybe just revealed as something that had always been there.

"Is that what it feels like for you?" I asked. "Getting ready in the morning?"

"Sometimes." Lego was quiet for a moment, considering. "Sometimes it's armor—a way of facing the world when I'm feeling vulnerable. Sometimes it's celebration—a way of expressing joy when everything feels bright. And sometimes it's just—" He paused. "A choice. A way of deciding who I want to be today."

"And today? What's today's makeup about?"

"Today I'm supporting my friends." His voice was soft, warm. "Today I'm showing up for the people I care about. So I wanted to look like I was taking it seriously. Because I am."

Something expanded in my chest—gratitude, affection, the particular warmth of being cared for by someone who understood.

"Thank you," I said. "For being here. For all of this."



"That's what friends do." I felt the brush pause, then resume. "Besides, you helped me too. Remember? When I was crying about the showcase, about not wanting to perform until P'William could come? You sat with me. You didn't try to fix it. You just—stayed."

"I remember."

"So I'm returning the favor. I'm staying." Another pause, another brush stroke. "There. You can open your eyes."

I did, and he handed me a small mirror.

The face looking back at me was still mine—same features, same basic structure. But the dark circles were gone, hidden beneath something that made my skin look even and rested. My eyes seemed brighter somehow, more alert. The overall effect was subtle but significant—I looked like someone who had their life together, someone who was ready to face the world.

"Better?" Lego asked.

"Better." I turned the mirror slightly, examining my reflection from different angles. "I actually look—"

"Like an artist," Lego finished. "Like someone whose paintings are going to hang in a gallery today and be amazing."

I set down the mirror and looked at him properly—this boy who had shown up at my house before I was ready, who had transformed both my outfit and my face, who had offered exactly the kind of support I didn't know I needed.

"Thank you." I said again, and this time the words came out heavier, weighted with everything I wasn't quite able to express.

Lego just smiled. "You're welcome. Now—we should probably think about leaving soon. What time do you need to be at the gallery?"

I checked my phone. 9:47 AM.

"We should probably—" I started, but I was interrupted by my phone ringing.

Nut's name flashed on the screen. My heart did something complicated—pleasure and nervousness and the particular flutter that his presence always created. I answered, bringing the phone to my ear.

"Hey," Nut said, his voice warm through the speaker. "I'm outside. Sorry—don't be mad." And then, before I could respond, he hung up.

I stared at my phone for a moment, processing. Then I turned to look at Lego, who was watching me with an expression of barely concealed delight.

"You," I said, realization dawning. "You told him to come."

"I told him you might appreciate a ride." Lego was already grabbing his bag, already moving toward the door. "And maybe some moral support. And maybe some flowers."

"Flowers?"

"You should probably come see for yourself."

He was out of the room before I could argue, his footsteps quick on the stairs. I heard the front door open, heard voices—Lego's bright greeting, another voice responding—and felt my stomach flip with something that wasn't quite anxiety.

I took one last look in the mirror. The person looking back at me was still nervous—I could see it in the set of my shoulders, the tension around my eyes. But they also looked—prepared. Ready. Like someone who might actually be able to survive what was coming. I grabbed my things—phone, keys, the small sketchbook I always carried—and headed downstairs.

Nut was standing next to his car. The morning light was catching him perfectly—gilding his hair, warming his skin, making the whole scene look like something from a photograph. He was dressed semi-formally too, in that effortless way some people achieved: a white t-shirt and white pants, black shoes and belt, a brown button-down collarless jacket that matched his hair exactly.

The whole outfit was simple but perfectly composed. The kind of thing that looked casual until you noticed how carefully each piece had been chosen, how well everything fit together.

In his hands, he held a bouquet of flowers. They were beautiful—a cascade of colors that somehow complemented each other perfectly, purples and pinks and soft whites that might have been chaotic from any other florist but here formed a cohesive, intentional arrangement. The kind of flowers that someone had put real thought into choosing.

For me. He'd brought flowers for me.

Lego was already heading toward a black car parked nearby—He paused just long enough to wave at me, that bright smile still on his face. "Well, my ride's here," he called out cheerfully. "I'll see you at the gallery, P'Hong. Good luck!"

He climbed into the car, the door closed behind him, and suddenly it was pulling away, leaving me alone with Nut.

The silence stretched between us—not uncomfortable, but full of something. Anticipation, maybe. The particular tension of two people who were still learning how to be around each other, still figuring out the language of their connection.

Nut took a step closer.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was coming for you," he said, his voice carrying that particular earnestness that always made my chest feel tight. "Lego said you might not want anyone seeing you this morning. Said you were nervous and needed space."

"I was," I admitted. "Am. Nervous, I mean."

"I thought—" He paused, seeming to gather his thoughts. "I thought maybe you'd want someone with you. For the drive over. If that's okay."

I looked at him—at the flowers in his hands, the hopeful expression on his face, the effort he'd put into being here, into showing up when I hadn't even asked him to.

"It's more than okay." I said.

His smile was like watching the sun come out—slow at first, then overwhelming. That particular expression he got when something made him genuinely happy, when I said or did something that he'd been hoping for but not quite expecting.

"Good." He held out the flowers. "These are for you. I wasn't sure what kind to get, so I asked the florist for something that said—" He stopped, his cheeks flushing slightly. "Something that said 'I'm proud of you and I believe in you and I want to be there for your important day.'"

"That's very specific."

"The florist was very patient."

I took the flowers, lifting them to my face to breathe in their scent. They smelled like hope, I thought. Like possibility. Like someone caring enough to show up with exactly the right gesture.

"Thank you," I said. "For the flowers. For coming. For—" I gestured vaguely, trying to encompass everything. "All of it."

"You don't have to thank me." Nut stepped closer still, close enough that I could see the gold flecks in his brown eyes. "I wanted to be here. I've been wanting to be here since you first told me about the exhibition."

"You have?"

"Hong." His voice was soft, serious in a way that made my heart do something complicated. "You're showing your art to the world today. Paintings that mean something to you, that came from somewhere real. Of course I wanted to be here. I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

The sincerity in his voice was almost overwhelming. This wasn't obligation—this was

choice. This was someone who wanted to be present for my important moments, who saw showing up as a privilege rather than a burden.

"I don't—" I started, then stopped, unsure how to express what I was feeling. "I'm not good at this. Accepting support. Letting people see me when I'm—" I gestured at myself, at the evidence of my anxiety despite the makeup and the carefully chosen outfit. "When I'm like this."

"Like what?"

"Scared. Vulnerable. Not—not the person I want to be."

Nut reached out and took my free hand, the one not holding the flowers. His grip was warm and steady, anchoring me in the moment. "I think you're exactly the person you should be," he said quietly. "And I think being scared and showing up anyway is braver than not being scared at all."

I didn't know what to say. The emotion was too big, caught somewhere between gratitude and terror and something that felt dangerously like hope. So instead of speaking, I squeezed his hand, trying to communicate what I couldn't manage with words.

"We should probably go," Nut said gently. "The exhibition opens at ten, right? You'll want to be there before the doors open."

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

We walked to his car together, hands still linked. He opened the passenger door for me—a gesture that was maybe old-fashioned but made something warm bloom in my chest—and I slid into the seat, still holding the bouquet.

As he walked around to the driver's side, I took a moment to just breathe. The interior of the car smelled faintly of his cologne, something clean and subtle that I was starting to associate with safety. With comfort. With the particular feeling of being cared for by someone who expected nothing in return.

Nut climbed in beside me, started the engine, and suddenly we were moving.

The city scrolled past the windows, familiar streets transforming as we got closer to campus. The morning traffic was light, the drive smoother than it would have been later in the day. I watched the buildings and trees and people pass by, trying to memorize this moment—the last few minutes of before, the final stretch of time when my paintings were still unseen by the general public.

"Tell me about them," Nut said, his eyes on the road. "The paintings. What am I going to see when I walk into that gallery?"

The question caught me off guard. Most people asked practical questions—when

does it open, how long will it last, how many pieces are in the show. No one had asked me to actually describe my work.

"There are three," I said slowly, finding the words. "The first one is called 'Almost.' It's—it's two figures reaching toward each other across this threshold of shadow and light. Their hands are almost touching, but not quite. The space between them is—" I paused, suddenly self-conscious. "It's about the moment before connection. The hope and the fear all tangled together."

"What made you paint that?" I looked at him—at his profile, his attention on the road, his easy patience.

"You," I admitted. "Partly. The months when I kept you at arm's length because I was scared of letting you close."

Nut's hands tightened slightly on the steering wheel. "I didn't know that."

"That's kind of the point. The painting says things I couldn't say out loud."

"And the other two?"

"'Fortress' is about—about the walls we build to protect ourselves. There's a figure surrounded by soft things, and you can't tell if they're safe or trapped. If the comfort is genuine or if it's just another way of hiding."

"And the third?"

The third. "The Real Me."

"That one—" I stopped, my throat suddenly tight. "That one is harder to explain. It's a mirror. A face that's distorted in the reflection, caught between hiding and being seen. I painted it at three in the morning, after one of those nights when I couldn't stop asking myself what was wrong with me."

The car was quiet for a moment. Then Nut reached across the console and took my hand.

"I can't wait to see them," he said simply. "All of them."

"Even the hard ones?"

"Especially the hard ones." He squeezed my fingers gently. "That's where the truth lives, isn't it? In the things we're afraid to say."

I didn't respond. Couldn't respond. The emotion was too close to the surface, threatening to spill over in ways I wasn't prepared to handle. But I held onto his hand, warm and steady in mine.

And as the university campus came into view through the windshield, I felt

something shift in my chest. Not the absence of fear—the fear was still there, still present, still whispering all the ways this could go wrong. But alongside it, something else.

Hope, maybe.

Or courage.

Or just the simple, powerful knowledge that I wasn't doing this alone.

The car turned into the university entrance, and the exhibition hall loomed ahead.

"Ready?" Nut asked.

I looked at the building that contained my paintings, my statements, my soul rendered in color and form. Looked at the flowers in my lap, the hand holding mine, the evidence that people cared enough to show up.

"No," I said honestly. "But I'm going to do it anyway."

Nut smiled—that warm, understanding expression that made everything feel slightly more bearable. "That's exactly right," he said. "That's exactly what courage looks like."

He parked the car, and we sat for a moment in the quiet. The morning sun was bright through the windows, warming the dashboard, making everything look golden and possible. In a few minutes, we would go inside. I would see my paintings on the walls, would read my statements printed beside them, would begin the long day of being seen by strangers. But for now—for this one perfect moment—I was just here. In a car with someone who cared about me, holding flowers that smelled like hope, about to take the biggest risk of my artistic life. And somehow, that felt like enough. That felt like everything.

The university arts building had been transformed. I knew these hallways, these classrooms, the particular quality of light that came through the large windows in the afternoon. I had walked this route hundreds of times—to classes, to critiques, to the quiet corners where I sketched when the world felt too loud. But today everything looked different. Today the space had become something else entirely.

Nut's hand was warm in mine as we approached the entrance.

The building had been decorated with balloons in the university's colors—deep blue and silver—and a fairly large welcome sign hung above the main doors: Annual Student Arts Festival. Even from outside, I could see people milling about, the particular energy of an event in its early hours. Not crowded yet, but alive with anticipation.

"There's quite a lot to see," Nut said, accepting a handful of brochures from a

student near the entrance. He flipped through them with genuine interest—the schedule of events, the map of different exhibition rooms, the list of performances happening later in the day. "Art exhibits, photography, sculpture, printmaking, model making... talks, theater, and dance performances this afternoon."

Dance performances. Lego's showcase was tomorrow and Sunday, but there were other dance students performing today. The arts festival was a celebration of everything creative the university had to offer.

Among the students handing out flyers near the entrance, I spotted a familiar figure. Lego was there, distributing brochures and guiding confused visitors toward different rooms. He was dressed in the semi-formal outfit I'd seen this morning—Even from a distance, I could see the particular brightness of his smile, the way he engaged with everyone who approached him.

He had always been like this. Social in a way that seemed effortless, popular at university events despite claiming he didn't have many friends. Most of the campus knew who he was—the boy who had arrived in his first year with colorful hair and flashy clothes, who seemed like a ray of sunshine helping anyone who needed it. I remembered the first time I'd really noticed him, before I'd even dared to speak to him. He'd been dancing in one of the practice rooms, alone, moving with a grace that had made me stop in the hallway and watch through the window.

Later, when I'd asked him for help choosing flowers for an illustration I was working on, I'd discovered that the brightness wasn't performance. Lego was genuinely good—kind in a way that didn't seem to expect anything in return. We'd started walking together downtown to our jobs, and somewhere along the way, he'd become one of the people I trusted most.

Now he was here, on the morning of my exhibition, handing out flyers despite his own performance looming tomorrow. Despite the exhaustion I knew he was carrying, the knee brace hidden under his clothes, the weight of everything he never talked about. He spotted us and waved, his face lighting up even brighter. I waved back, a small gesture that felt inadequate for the gratitude I felt.

"Ready?" Nut asked, squeezing my hand.

I wasn't. I never would be. But I nodded anyway.

We went inside.

The first room we entered was one of the larger galleries, currently being used for an orientation talk. One of the art teachers—Professor Sirilak, who had taught my color theory class—stood at the front, addressing a small crowd of students and their families.

"The act of displaying art is an act of radical vulnerability," she was saying, her

voice carrying the particular conviction of someone who believed every word. "When we hang our work on walls, we are not simply showing what we have made—we are showing who we are."

I stopped walking. Nut stopped beside me, our hands still linked.

"Every brushstroke is a confession," Professor Sirilak continued. "Every color choice is a secret revealed. To stand in a gallery while strangers examine your soul is to be simultaneously invisible and completely exposed—hidden behind the frame while naked within it."

The words landed in my chest like stones.

Hidden behind the frame while naked within it.

That was exactly what today felt like. I was going to stand in a room while people looked at my paintings—at "Almost" and "Fortress" and "The Real Me"—and they would see things about me that I had never said out loud. They would read the descriptions I'd written, the words that tried to explain what I'd been feeling when I put brush to canvas, and they would know. Some parents approached the professor to thank her. I watched them—the proud mothers, the slightly uncomfortable fathers, the siblings who looked bored but were there anyway. Family. Support. The particular warmth of having people show up for your important moments.

My parents were in China. They hadn't come back.

The thought arrived without warning, bringing its familiar sting. I pushed it away, focusing instead on the warmth of Nut's hand in mine.

He squeezed my fingers, as if he'd sensed the shift in my thoughts. "Don't be nervous," he said softly, smiling. "You make me nervous too."

"I make you nervous?"

"Standing next to someone this talented? Absolutely terrifying." His tone was light, teasing, but his eyes were sincere. "I keep wondering if you'll realize you're out of my league and run away."

"You're ridiculous."

"Ridiculously into you, maybe."

I felt my face heat. Even after everything—after the flowers this morning, after the drive to the university, after the quiet moments of connection we'd been building for months—his directness still caught me off guard.

"Come on," I said, pulling him toward the exit. "I want to see the other rooms before it gets crowded."



We spent the morning together. It was strange, walking through the arts building with Nut. Strange in a good way—strange because I kept expecting the anxiety to overwhelm me, kept waiting for the panic to spike and ruin everything. But it didn't. His presence was a steady anchor, keeping me grounded even as we moved through rooms filled with other students' work.

There was so much art. Paintings and photographs and sculptures, installations that used light and sound, printmaking pieces with intricate details that made me want to examine every line. I recognized some of my classmates' work—pieces I'd seen in progress during critiques, now finished and hung on actual walls. Nut asked questions. That surprised me too. He wasn't just tolerating the exhibition for my sake—he was genuinely engaged, pausing in front of pieces that caught his attention, reading the artist statements, asking me to explain techniques I knew he didn't fully understand.

"What's this one about?" he asked, stopping in front of a photography series that showed the same street corner at different times of day. "It's beautiful, but I feel like I'm missing something."

"It's about memory," I said, studying the images. "See how the light changes? The photographer is showing how the same place can feel completely different depending on when you experience it. The street corner isn't just a location—it's a collection of moments."

"Like how a song can make you remember a whole summer."

"Exactly like that."

He turned to look at me, something soft in his expression. "I love listening to you talk about art. You see things I would never notice on my own."

"You notice things too. Just different things."

"What things?"

I hesitated, suddenly aware of how close we were standing. "You notice people. Their moods, their needs. This morning, you knew exactly when to show up. You brought flowers because you knew I'd need something beautiful to hold onto. You—" I stopped, the words catching in my throat.

"I what?"

"You pay attention. To me." The admission felt enormous, vulnerable in a way that had nothing to do with art. "Most people look at me and see someone quiet. Someone easy to overlook. But you—you actually see."

Nut was quiet for a moment. Then he reached up and touched my face, his fingers light against my cheek. "I see you," he said simply. "I've always seen you. Even

before I understood what I was looking at."

We stood there, in the middle of a photography exhibition, strangers moving around us like we were just two more pieces of art. I wanted to kiss him. The urge was sudden and overwhelming, and completely inappropriate for a public space filled with university staff and students' families. I stepped back instead, my heart pounding.

"We should—we should find my paintings."

Nut smiled, something knowing in his expression. "Lead the way."

They were in the back corner of the main gallery. I had known this—the coordinator had sent us all a map yesterday—but knowing and seeing were different things. We moved through different rooms, past landscapes and abstracts and portraits, past sculptures that made Nut stop and stare, past installations that required explanation. And then, among them all, there they were.

My three paintings. Hung together on a section of wall that felt both too prominent and not prominent enough. My name printed on a small card beside them: Hong Pichetpong. And beneath my name, the titles and descriptions I'd written weeks ago, when the exhibition had felt safely distant. I stood in front of them now—my paintings, my words, my soul rendered in oil and canvas—and felt the ground shift beneath my feet.

This was real. This was happening.

Strangers would stand exactly where I was standing and look at exactly what I was looking at. I stood there, frozen, staring at my own work like I'd never seen it before.

"Almost" was on the left—two figures reaching toward each other across a threshold of shadow and light, their hands almost touching but not quite. The description read: The space between reaching and touching. The moment before connection, when hope and fear are tangled together. For everyone who has almost been brave enough.

"Fortress" was in the middle—a figure surrounded by soft things, plushies and blankets and pillows piled high, their expression ambiguous. Protection or prison? Comfort or trap? The description read: The walls we build to survive. The soft things we surround ourselves with to feel safe. What happens when we can no longer tell if we're being held or suffocated?

And "The Real Me" was on the right. The mirror. The distorted reflection. The face that was and wasn't mine, caught between hiding and being seen.

What we see when we finally stop pretending. The terror and the freedom of being exactly who we are. For everyone who has looked in a mirror and wondered if what

they saw was worthy of love. These paintings were pieces of me. Literal fragments of my inner life, translated into color and form and hung on a wall for anyone to examine. The thoughts I'd never spoken, the fears I'd never admitted, the particular loneliness of being different in ways that most people never noticed—all of it was right here, visible to anyone who cared to look.

What had I been thinking?

"Hong."

Nut's voice was soft, close. I realized he'd moved to stand beside me, his shoulder almost touching mine, his presence a warm anchor in my sudden spiral.

"These are—" He stopped, seemed to reconsider his words. "I knew you were talented. You've shown me sketches before, your tattoo designs. But this is different."

"Different how?"

"More." He was looking at "The Real Me," his expression impossible to read. "More honest. More—" He turned to face me, his eyes searching my face. "Is this really how you see yourself? The figure in the mirror?"

I didn't answer. Couldn't answer. The truth felt too heavy to speak.

"It's beautiful," Nut said quietly. "The painting, I mean. The technique is incredible—the way you captured the distortion of the reflection, the lighting on the figure's face. But it's also—" He paused, choosing words carefully. "It's also sad. Like you're looking at yourself and not believing what you see."

The accuracy of his observation made my chest ache.

"Sometimes I don't," I admitted, the words barely audible. "Believe what I see. There are days when the person in the mirror feels like a stranger. Someone I'm supposed to be but don't know how to become."

Nut was quiet for a moment. Then he stepped closer, close enough that I could feel the warmth radiating from his body.

"I wish you could see yourself the way I see you," he said. "Not the distorted version. Not the version your brain shows you at three in the morning. The real version—the one who's standing here, terrified but doing it anyway. The one who made something this beautiful out of something this painful."

"Nut—"

"I'm not saying the pain isn't real. I know it is. I can see it in every brushstroke of that painting." He reached out and took my hand, threading his fingers through

mine. "But I also see someone who took that pain and turned it into art. Someone who's brave enough to hang their soul on a wall and let the world look. That's not nothing, Hong. That's everything."

I didn't know what to say. The emotion was too close to the surface, threatening to spill over in ways I wasn't prepared to handle—not here, not now, not with the exhibition about to officially open. So I just held his hand tighter. And that was enough.

We spent the rest of the morning together. There were talks and panels to attend—artists discussing their processes, professors offering insights into different movements and techniques. We sat in the back of the lecture hall for a discussion on contemporary portraiture, Nut's hand resting on my knee under the table, warm and grounding.

We looked at more art—photography series and ceramic installations and a sculpture made entirely of recycled materials that made Nut laugh with surprised delight. We got coffee from the café in the arts building, standing in line with other visitors while the morning crowd slowly grew. I checked my paintings three times. They were still there. Still hanging. Still exposing everything I'd ever been afraid to say.

My phone buzzed with messages from the group chat. Tui wishing me luck with a string of encouraging emojis. Est asking if I wanted him to come early to take professional photos. Lego sending a selfie from outside the building, still handing out flyers, with the caption: I'm so proud of you P'Hong!!!

I responded to each of them, my thumbs moving across the screen while Nut read over my shoulder.

"You have good friends." he observed.

"I know."

"They really care about you."

"I know that too." I looked at him, at the soft smile on his face. "So do you."

His smile widened. "I really do."

At two o'clock, my phone buzzed with a message from my sister.

We're outside! Where are you?

I took a breath. This was it. The family portion of the day. The part where I would have to stand in front of my paintings while my sister looked at them, while my nephew examined them with his particular four-year-old intensity, while I waited to see if they understood what I'd been trying to say.

"Ready?" Nut asked.

"No," I admitted. "But let's go anyway."

We left the building together, stepping into the afternoon sunlight. The campus was busier now—more families, more visitors, the particular energy of an event hitting its stride. I scanned the crowd, looking for my sister's familiar face.

I spotted her near the entrance, Kevin's hand gripped firmly in hers. She was dressed nicely—a floral dress I recognized from family dinners—and her expression was bright with anticipation. Kevin was bouncing on his feet, that particular restlessness of a child who'd been told to wait but didn't want to. I raised my hand to wave at them.

"Kevin!" I called out, taking a step forward with my arms already opening for a hug.

But Kevin wasn't looking at me. His eyes had fixed on something—someone—a few meters away. His face lit up with pure, unfiltered joy, and before my sister could stop him, he was running.

Right past me.

"Lego!"

Kevin launched himself at Lego, who had been standing nearby talking to some girls I recognized from my classes. Lego caught him with practiced ease, his face breaking into a delighted grin as he hoisted my nephew onto his hip.

"Kevin! Hey, little guy!" Lego's voice was warm with genuine affection. "You came to see your uncle's art!"

I stood there, arms still half-extended, feeling a complicated mix of emotions. Amusement, mostly. A little bruised pride. But also something warm—the knowledge that my nephew loved the people I loved, that my world and his world overlapped in these small, precious ways.

"I see how it is," I said as Lego carried Kevin toward us. "I'm just the uncle. Lego's the main event."

Lego laughed, shifting Kevin on his hip. "Sorry, P'Hong. I can't help being irresistible."

My sister had caught up to us, slightly out of breath from trying to keep pace with her sprinting son. Her eyes moved from me to Nut, taking in our joined hands, and a knowing smile spread across her face.

"Hong," she said, pulling me into a hug with her free arm. "You look good. Less terrified than I expected."

"The terror is internal."

"As long as it stays there." She released me and turned to Nut, extending her hand. "You must be Nut. I'm Ploy, Hong's sister."

"It's nice to meet you," Nut said, shaking her hand. His voice was warm, confident—the version of himself he showed to people who mattered. "Hong's told me a lot about you."

"All good things, I hope."

"Nothing but."

Lego had joined our circle, Gavin still perched on his hip. My nephew was playing with one of the silver hairpins in Lego's hair, utterly fascinated by the way it sparkled in the sunlight.

"Lego," my sister said, greeting him with the familiarity of someone who had met him many times before. "Thank you for being here. I know you have your own performance to prepare for."

"I wouldn't miss P'Hong's exhibition for anything." Lego's smile was bright, but I could see the fatigue beneath it—the shadows under his eyes that even his careful makeup couldn't quite hide. "Besides, I'm just handing out flyers. Not exactly strenuous."

I watched him shift his weight, trying to take pressure off his right leg without being obvious about it. The knee brace. The exhaustion he never admitted to. The way he kept showing up for everyone else while running on empty.

"Have you all eaten?" my sister asked. "Gavin's been asking about food for the past hour."

"I'm hungry!" Gavin announced, as if on cue.

"There are some nice places near campus," Nut offered. "We could grab lunch before looking at the exhibition."

My sister's smile widened. "That sounds perfect." She looked between me and Nut, then at our still-joined hands. "Lead the way."

As we started walking, I fell into step beside Lego and reached out to take Gavin from him.

"I know your knee is still bothering you," I said quietly. "And he's getting too heavy. You have a performance tomorrow. Give me the child."

Gavin complained at first—"But I want to stay with Lego!"—but then he settled into my arms, wrapping his small hands around my neck and resting his head on my

shoulder.

"Thanks, P'Hong," Lego said, his voice soft with relief he probably didn't mean to show. "I'm fine, really, but—"

"You're not fine. But you're here anyway." I met his eyes. "Thank you for that."

He smiled—not the bright, performance smile he showed to strangers, but something smaller and more genuine. "That's what friends do."

"Uncle Hong," he said solemnly, "Lego is prettier than you."

"I'm aware."

Nut choked on a laugh behind us. Lego's cheeks flushed slightly, and I saw him trying to hide a smile.

We found a restaurant near campus—a small place with outdoor seating that could accommodate our unusual group. The afternoon sun was warm but not oppressive, filtered through the canopy of trees that lined the street. Lunch was surprisingly comfortable. My sister asked Nut about his work, his interests, how we'd met. Nut answered with easy charm, making her laugh with stories about our early interactions—the miscommunications, the awkward moments, the slow realization that something was building between us.

Lego entertained Gavin, producing a small origami crane from his pocket that made my nephew shriek with delight. The two of them folded napkins into increasingly complicated shapes, Gavin's attempts messy but enthusiastic.

I sat back and watched it all—this strange, beautiful collection of people who had somehow become my life. My sister, who had always been more parent than sibling. My nephew, who saw the world with uncomplicated joy. Lego, who carried more weight than anyone realized but still found energy to make a child smile. Nut, who looked at me like I was something worth seeing.

A year ago, I wouldn't have believed this was possible. A year ago, I had been so closed off, so convinced that letting people close would only lead to pain, that I had almost missed out on all of it. The friendships. The connection. The particular warmth of being known and accepted anyway.

"You're thinking again." I looked up. Lego was watching me from across the table, his expression knowing.

"Just—appreciating this," I said. "All of it."

"You deserve it." Lego's voice was quiet enough that only I could hear. "You deserve to have people who show up for you. Remember that, okay?"

Before I could respond, my sister was standing, gathering her things.

"Alright, Kevin. Time to see Uncle Hong's paintings."

Kevin cheered. We paid the bill and headed back to the university. On the walk back, my sister and I fell behind the others. Nut was ahead with Kevin, my nephew having demanded to be carried by "the tall one" a designation that made Nut laugh. Lego walked beside them, answering Kevin's endless questions with patient good humor. My sister linked her arm through mine.

"So," she said. "He's the guy."

I felt my face heat. "Yeah."

"I thought you'd end up dating Lego, honestly." Her tone was thoughtful, not judgmental.

"Lego's—" I searched for the right words. "Lego's special. But not like that. He's family."

"And Nut?"

I looked ahead at him—at the way he was carrying my nephew with easy strength, at the way he turned to include Lego in the conversation, at the particular kindness that seemed to radiate from everything he did.

"Nut is something else," I said. "Something I'm still figuring out."

"He looks at you like you're the most interesting thing in any room." My sister squeezed my arm. "That's not nothing."

"I know."

"And you look at him the same way."

"I—" I stopped, surprised by the observation. "Do I?"

"You do." She smiled, soft and knowing. "It's good, Hong. He seems good. You two are a good match."

The words settled into my chest, warm and affirming. My sister's approval had always mattered more than I liked to admit—especially with our parents so often absent, so often unavailable for the moments that counted.

"Thanks, jie."

"For what?"

"For being here. For—" I gestured vaguely at everything: the exhibition, the lunch,



the way she'd taken the afternoon off work to support me. "For always showing up."

Her expression softened. "That's what family does."

The gallery felt different with my family in it. The morning's quiet intensity had given way to afternoon crowds—more visitors, more noise, more strangers examining the art on the walls. But my sister and Kevin moved through the space with a focus that blocked out everything else.

We stood in front of my paintings.

Kevin studied each one with exaggerated seriousness, his small face scrunched in concentration. When he reached "The Real Me," he put on what I had come to recognize as his "impressed face"—wide eyes, raised eyebrows, mouth slightly open. It looked a bit like he needed to sneeze. "This one's good, Uncle Hong," he declared. "It's like a mirror but weird."

"Thanks, buddy."

"The colors are pretty." He pointed at the blues and silvers I'd used for the reflection. "Like your hair."

I reached down and ruffled his hair. "I'm glad you like it."

My sister was quieter. She stood in front of "Fortress" for a long time, reading the description, looking at the painting, reading the description again. I watched her face do something complicated—recognition, maybe. Or understanding. When she moved to "The Real Me," I saw her eyes go bright with tears.

"Hong," she said softly.

"Jie—"

"I didn't know." She turned to face me, and the tears were falling now, streaking down her cheeks in thin, silver lines. "I didn't know you felt this way. That you—" She gestured at the painting, at the distorted mirror, at the question I'd painted in oil and canvas.

"It's just art," I said, the deflection automatic. "It's not—"

"Don't." Her voice was firm. "Don't minimize it. I can see what this is. I can see what you've been carrying." She reached out and pulled me into a hug, tight and fierce. "I'm sorry I didn't see it sooner. I'm sorry you felt like you had to hide it."

I hugged her back, my throat too tight for words.

"Mom and Dad should be here," she said into my shoulder. "They should see this. They should understand what their son has been going through."

"They have their trip. It's okay—"

"It's not okay. But I'm here." She pulled back, holding my shoulders, looking at me with fierce, tear-streaked love. "I'm here, and I'm so proud of you. So proud of what you've made, and so proud that you were brave enough to show it."

Kavin tugged at her dress. "Mommy, why are you crying? Uncle Hong's art made you sad?"

My sister laughed, the sound wet and trembling. "No, baby. Uncle Hong's art made me feel things. That's what good art does."

"Oh." Kavin considered this. "I feel things too. I feel hungry again."

The tension broke. We all laughed—my sister, me, Nut, even Lego, who was standing slightly apart, watching the scene with something soft and wistful in his expression.

"There's a café downstairs," I said. "We can get snacks before the dance performances start."

Kavin cheered. Crisis averted.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a warm blur. We watched some of the dance performances—Kavin was mesmerized, his small body bouncing in his seat to the music. My sister took photos. Nut held my hand through all of it. By the time evening came and my family had to leave, I felt—Different.

Not cured of the anxiety, not suddenly confident about everything. But lighter, somehow. Like the weight I'd been carrying had been redistributed, shared among the people who cared about me.

"I'm proud of you," my sister said as she hugged me goodbye. "Today was just the first day, but you did it. You survived."

"It was easier than I expected."

"Because you weren't alone." She pulled back, her eyes still faintly red from earlier tears. "Remember that, okay? You don't have to do everything alone."

I nodded. Hugged Kavin, who demanded I lift him up so he could be "as tall as Nut." Watched them walk away toward the parking lot, my sister's hand firmly gripping my nephew's.

Lego left too, citing the need to rest before tomorrow's performance. I watched him go with a mixture of gratitude and concern—gratitude for his presence, concern for the exhaustion he couldn't quite hide.

And then it was just me and Nut. We stood outside the arts building as the sun

began to set, the golden light making everything look softer, more forgiving. The crowds had thinned. The day was ending.

"How do you feel?" Nut asked.

I considered the question. Tried to be honest.

"Tired," I admitted. "Relieved. A little bit like I survived something I wasn't sure I could survive."

"You did more than survive. You thrived." He took my hand, threading his fingers through mine. "Your sister's reaction—the way she looked at your paintings—that wasn't just politeness. That was someone really seeing what you made and being moved by it."

"She cried."

"Good crying. The kind that means something reached her."

"Yeah." I looked down at our joined hands, at the evidence of connection. "I guess it did."

We were quiet for a moment, standing in the fading light. The campus around us was settling into evening mode—students heading to dinner, families departing, the particular hush that fell over academic buildings after the crowds dispersed.

"Thank you," I said. "For being here all day. For holding my hand through it."

"I wanted to be here." Nut's voice was soft, sincere. "I want to be here for all of it. The scary parts and the triumphant parts and everything in between."

I looked at him—really looked, taking in the warmth in his eyes, the gentle curve of his smile, the particular way he held himself when he was being earnest.

A year ago, I wouldn't have believed this was possible. A year ago, I had been so convinced that I needed to hide, to protect myself, to keep everyone at arm's length. I had built my fortress of soft things and told myself it was enough. But standing here now, with Nut's hand in mine and my family's love still warm in my chest and my paintings hanging on gallery walls for anyone to see—I realized that the fortress had never been enough. The walls had kept me safe, yes. But they had also kept me alone.

And I didn't want to be alone anymore.

"Hey." I said.

"Yeah?"

"I'm really glad you're here. Not just today. Just—in general. In my life."

Nut's expression softened into something that made my chest ache.

"Me too," he said. "I'm really glad I'm here too."

The sun continued to set, painting the sky in shades of orange and pink. The first day of the exhibition was over. And somehow, against all odds, I had survived it. More than survived—I had let myself be seen. By my sister, by Lego, by Nut. By strangers who had stopped in front of my paintings and read my words and maybe, just maybe, understood something true about the human experience.

A year ago, I never would have dared to do this. But now everything was different. And although today was only the first day—although there were still two more days of the exhibition, still more strangers to face, still more vulnerability to endure—I felt, for the first time in a long time, that everything would turn out well.

I squeezed Nut's hand.

He squeezed back.

And together, we walked into the evening.